DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 190 966 CG 014 613

AUTHOR Cohen, Ruth I.
TITLE Reducing Test Anxiety: A Right Brain Approach.
PUB DATE [80]
NOTE 7p.: Best copy available.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change; *Change Strategies; *Coping; Expectation; *Fantasy; Helping Relationship; Humor; Individual Power; Models; *Relaxation Training; Student Adjustment; *Test Anxiety; Testing Problems

ABSTRACT

Methods of helping students reduce test anxiety are discussed, including guided fantasy which leads students to imagine a setting in which they feel competent and relaxed. Catastrophic-anastrophic expectations teach that different expectations create different feelings and make students aware that they are in charge of their own attitudes. Anxiety is viewed as a breathing difficulty, and various breathing exercises to reduce it are described. A series of relaxation exercises and specific coping techniques are also discussed. Finally, the use of humor is suggested as a way to reduce tension. (NRB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED190966

REDUCING TEST ANXIETY: A RIGHT BRAIN APPROACH

by: Ruth I. Cohen, Ed.D.

At a conference which focuses largely on evaluative, judgmental, reasoning, left-brain activities, it may seem somewhat curious to suggest that processes which may be described as non-rational, non-thinking may have a great impact on the outcome of our efforts to measure and evaluate.

We are all familiar with the student who defeats himself before he ever lifts his pencil. The student may be any age. I am reminded of a graduate student who entered the exam room when I did to take his written qualifying exams. He took one look at the questions, packed up his things, and walked out. He gave up before he ever started. I'm reminded of another graduate student, a teaching assistant in Physics, who felt that he had so much riding on each evaluation of his progress that he became physically ill to the point of nausea and throwing up before each exam, and headaches on the day following the ordeal.

I will suggest to you some ways of helping students move out of the "helpless-hopeless" attitude which is so self-defeating, and explore with you some ways of enabling students to reduce the anxiety they experience related to test taking. We will consider some strategies that can set the stage for a positive test-taking experience. Among these are guided fantasy, deep breathing, relaxation exercises, and humor.

Use Guided Fantasy to Set the Stage for Positive Test-Taking Experience

How we introduce Guided Fantasy is important. It needs to be gradual, reassuring, non-threatening. "Pretend you're my class. Class, we're going to do something different today, I'd like you to close and then open your eyes very fast.

Q. What do we call that? Yes. Blinking

Now, close them again just long enough to try to see a red dot or red ball. Any trouble with that?

CG 014613

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Ruth Cohen
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Now, try to see the front door of your house or apartment. Then open your eyes and return to the room. How many people who had trouble with the red dot found the door easier? (Familiar things are easier to visualize).

Now, close your eyes just long enough to try to see an animal. Then open your eyes and come back into the room. What did you see? How come everyone saw different things?

Now, close your eyes, see the animal again and this time, see what it does. When you're ready, let yourself return. Share experiences.

Anyone not able to see anything so far?

Now, imagine you are in a meadow on a warm, spring day. Imagine the breeze-warmth - you feel comfortable and relaxed - only peace and harmony are here -- you are enjoying the scent of flowers. You find a special flower different, unique. You observe it, smell the fragrance. Now, become this flower. You are special, unique, powerful. Everyone here is like this. You feel good, relaxed. Now, remember a time when learning was fun for you, perhaps when you were learning to swin, or skate, or ride a bicycle, and you felt competent and capable. Raise your hand when you are there and then lower it. Become aware of who you were with and how you felt.

Let that good feeling spread thru your whole body and thru the whole room. Then come back. Remind yourself: I have been successful, I have been effective in the past, and I will be successful again."

Catastrophic - Anastrophic Expectations

1. Imagine you are standing in the center of a small terrace in the highest building in the world. Walk to the edge. Come back. Be here in the room. How did you feel? How do you feel about the support in your life right now?

The images we hold in our mind affect our physical body. In REALITY, we were right here -- but our bodies were responding to the images. Some people were exhilarated, some were afraid. We choose what we want to believe.

2. Now, go back up to the building. This time, you can fly! Fly anywhere you'd like to be. Be there for a little while, until you're ready to come back. How did you feel?

   Note that different expectations create different feelings. A different mind set makes the difference. Students can control their mind set.

Deep Breathing

Imagining catastrophes is related to the anxiety some students experience before taking tests. In addition to creating awareness that they are in charge of their own attitudes, you might try some of the following:

1. Breathe deeply - Notice if you tend to hold your breath. Gestalt therapists believe that the suppression of excitement produces a breathing difficulty which is anxiety, that anxiety is the physical experience of trying to get more air into lungs which are immobilized by muscular constriction.

   Anxiety and breathing difficulty go together. When you become anxious, pay attention to your breathing. Try the following exercise:

   > Exhale thoroughly, four or five times. Then breathe softly, making sure of the exhalation, but without forcing. Can you feel the stream of air in your throat, in your mouth, in your head? Allow the air to blow from your mouth and feel the stream of it with your hand. Do you keep your chest expanded even when no air is coming in? Do you hold in your stomach during inhalation? Can you feel your ribs expand on your sides and back? Notice the tautness of your throat; of your jaws; the closure of the nose. Pay attention especially to the tightness of the midriff (diaphragm). Concentrate on these tensions and allow developments.

   The next time you feel excitement over a person, situation, etc., become aware of your breathing.

o Do you hold your breath?

- If so, what are you holding back?
- Try breathing more deeply

Although unrestricted breathing dispels anxiety, some students who suffer anxiety statessimply cannot follow the advice to exhale and to inhale. Since they are not really aware of their behavior, they maintain against their breathing a system of motor tensions, such as tightening the diaphragm, tightening the throat, sticking out the chest. To eliminate the constriction, have these students yawn and stretch. At the peak of the stretch and inhalation, have them exaggerate the letting-go process and allow the built-up tensions to collapse.

Conduct a talking out or discussion session, encouraging students to get in touch with how they feel, acknowledging their feelings, and reassuring them that it is normal and o.k. Then, have them pay attention to their breathing. "As you inhale, notice the air going into your nose and down your throat and neck. Feel your ribs spread apart as you inhale, feel the stretching of your back, the increase in the amount of space you occupy as you expand your chest. Try to feel the exhalation as simply the effortless, elastic return of ribs and muscles to the resting condition.

As you begin to breath deeply, think, as you inhale, "I am." And as you exhale, think, "relaxed." Repeat this for a few minutes.

2. Another strategy is to use exaggeration and then reversal of feelings Exaggerate your feelings of fear or inadequacy. Tell yourself how stupid, how fearful, how inadequate you feel. Imagine the worst that could happen -- perhaps, even act it out.

Now, reverse your feelings. Try the opposite of fear, fierceness. Look fierce. Move around and act fierce. Feel your power when being fierce. Visualize being strong and in control.

Relaxation

Another strategy is progressive relaxation. Tense up each muscle sequentially, then release sequentially, like a wave.

Or tense up one muscle set at a time, then shake it out.

1. Make yourself comfortable and free from interruptions. Lie down on the floor or sit in an easy chair. Close your eyes and slowly take three deep breaths. While you exhale, tell yourself to relax and imagine the tension is leaving you.
2. Curl and tense your toes as tightly as possible, holding for a slow count of five. Relax them completely.
3. Tense your toes, feet and lower legs. Keep these muscles as tight as possible for the five counts, then relax. The rest of your body should stay relaxed.
4. Tense the upper legs as well as the lower legs, feet and toes. Again, hold for five slow counts, then feel the relaxation as you release them.
5. Tense the lower back and abdomen. Tense the muscles more and more as you count to five. Relax.
6. Tense the upper torso --- shoulders, chest and back --- for five counts. Relax.
7. Tense the muscles in your face and scalp, and clench your teeth. Hold for five counts. Relax.
8. Tense your whole body for five counts. Start at the bottom and work up, as you did above. Then relax and enjoy the total pleasant feeling. Mentally scan your body for any part that isn't relaxed; tensing and releasing that part should do the trick. After a minute, open your eyes and move on to step two.

The most important point of this relaxation technique is to feel the difference between the tensed and relaxed states, so that you can recognize what it feels like to be totally relaxed in a game.

One 9th grade algebra teacher reports spending about 5 minutes doing a fantasy where the students closed their eyes and were asked to finish their unfinished thoughts and feelings before starting the classwork or test and then to fantasize being in a place they'd like to be. Then they were asked to slowly open their eyes and come back. The time spent doing this was no more than the usual amount of time getting the class started, but the productivity seemed much greater. "The exercises had a calming influence, and the students seemed to be able to concentrate on their studies better after the experience. They even seemed to relate much better with one another."

Use specific coping techniques to move out of the helpless-hopeless attitude. Instead of throwing in the towel before you start, see if there is some new way to approach the problem. If there are 20 problems to solve in an arithmetic exam, and you get stuck on the tenth one, don't feel hopeless. Skip it. Go on to the next one. Then, go back if there's anything left. (Audience sharing).

Use humor to relax the tension. One strategy is to have the class begin to laugh deliberately. You may be familiar with Norman Counsin's story of how he moved out of his hospital room during a severe illness, checked into a hotel, and immersed himself in old Marx Brothers movies to reduce the gloom and anxiety associated with the hospital setting. Dr. Schweitzer in Africa used humor to lighten the atmosphere and reduce the tension by telling a joke before every meal.